

The “New Look” In Contemporary Theology

The theological currents of the western world have shifted markedly in the last decade. While at Harvard (1942-45) the present writer noticed that the most eagerly welcomed campus preacher (and the most controversial) was Reinhold Niebuhr. As might be expected, the first clear convictions that a chapter in theological history had closed and a new one opened were voiced in meetings of younger theologians as in the Interseminary Movement (e.g., at Oxford, Ohio, in 1947). Protestant liberals have voiced protest at the shift in the direction of “neo-orthodoxy” (e.g., De Wolf, *The Religious Revolt Against Reason*, 1949). Conservatives have viewed the “new look” on the theological horizon with general distrust (e.g., Van Til, *The New Modernism*, 1948). The recognition that it was time for a change is now quite general. A. S. Nash has collected a series of extremely interesting essays showing the extent of change in virtually every area of the theological field (*Protestant Thought in the Twentieth Century*, 1951). Anderson has shown the way toward *Rediscovering the Bible* (the Association Press, 1951) in what may be a successor to Fosdick, *A Guide to Understanding the Bible*. Now that “the dust has settled” it may be confidently asserted that we have reached the end of an era in western theological thought.

The group that has been most affected by the change is the humanists and their fellow-travellers. This group sees in the present “revolt against reason” merely the result of fear psychology. They can point to parallels in other centuries when millennial expectations and apocalyptic hopes coincided with times of crisis. The candor of many liberals is commendable. A. C. McGiffert, Jr., recently described himself to the University of Illinois as a “reconstructed liberal.” Walter Horton of Oberlin is willing to call himself a “repentant liberal.” Morton Scott Enslin of Crozier whimsically alludes to himself as an “old fashioned” liberal. There are many others who will readily admit that their ‘minds have changed’ markedly in the last decade. A bland liberalism which regards man as essentially good and progress inevitable is not flourishing in war-blighted Europe and Asia.

There are some intimations of an altered emphasis among ultra-conservative groups. Among these there is an increasing willingness to subordinate cherished dogmas to facts. There is often evident a new earnestness and boldness in welcoming new light from all sources regardless of modifications which it may compel. Among them also is a large measure of appreciation for the new emphasis upon man's sinfulness, and need of salvation, which the "theology of crisis" has promoted.

The violent extremes in the theological pendulum between liberal and conservative, which characterized the last half-century, is now likely to give way to a greater degree of synthesis. This situation may create a theological atmosphere in which the Biblical evangel of God's grace to sinful men will find an easier hearing. Such, at least, seems to be the present trend.

In this period of rapid transition, adherents of the historical Wesleyan tradition must orient themselves. With the "neo-orthodox" in the Calvinistic tradition they affirm the estrangement of man from God and his desperate need of salvation. They believe, however, that God is not so exclusively transcendent, nor man so destitute of good will, that reconciliation is virtually impossible. Instead they hold that a proper emphasis upon the grace of God will resolve the tension involved in the "divine-human encounter" and effect full reconciliation. With the "fundamentalists" they can affirm the integrity and complete trustworthiness of the Bible as against both "neo-orthodoxy" and "liberalism." With the liberals they adhere to the worth of the individual but insist upon his native depravity and debility. With them also they recognize that "he who loves God should love his brother also." This position is not an attempt at eclecticism or a mere synthesis. It comes rather from a recognition that the proper grasp of the New Testament doctrine of *grace* holds to the sinfulness of man and his worth and salvability, on the one hand, and on the other to the love of God in Christ which makes the divine life operative in human personality. Even the complex tensions of the modern world will be resolved when men return to the grace of God in Christ. Perhaps, at long last, contemporary theology will assist the evangelist in popularizing this conviction. The articles in this number, amid their diversity, agree in this hope for the next generation.

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